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WHO CARES FOR THE REFUGEE?

by

Edward Rogers

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ONE

WHO ARE THEY?

THE IMAGINATIVE appeal of World Refugee Year, following the shock to civilized conscience of the abortive Hungarian Revolution of 1956, has made us at last aware of the tragic situation of the refugee. Millions of men and women and children have, for one reason or another, been driven from or have escaped from their native lands. Who are these people? Why are they exiled from home? How many are there? What is being done for them? What ought to be done?

I should like to begin by taking you to a little church in Austria, an unpretentious but pleasant building. The door steward will shake your hand formally and lengthily, in the continental fashion, before he hands you your hymn-book and escorts you to your seat. A man of medium height and wiry build, with greying dark hair, he looks just what he is: a seriously inclined skilled worker not quite at his ease in his Sunday suit.

You will look round an entirely normal congregation. Near the front, looking after the children, is a plump, comfortable, motherly lady, whom you can without effort visualize behind a tea-pot at your own Women's Meeting at home. On each side of her is a restless boy, and it takes no detective genius to deduce that she is sitting between them to keep them out of mischief. Within easy reach is the inevitable very small girl, solemnly reading a hymn-book she is holding upside down.

At the organ is a most attractive young lady, and you will certainly look at her more than once before the service is over, for she is not only easy to look at but is so obviously absorbed in the worship.

The steward, the plump lady and the organist are father, mother and daughter. You would not be in the least surprised to see them coming out of church together in a

Devonshire village or a Lancashire mill town. They are ordinary, decent, kindly folk. Then why do I take you all the way to Austria to meet a family that might be living in your street?

The reason is that once they were refugees. This is an actual family, slightly disguised out of courtesy to them—for they are my friends—but not invented. In 1946 the attractive organist was a bewildered seven-year-old waif, caught up in a panic flight from the advancing Russian Army and dropped into a makeshift refugee reception camp. The pastor of the little church found her there, weeping out her heart in fear and loneliness. He took the pathetic little scrap of humanity into his own home. Her mother, drafted into the Nazi slave-labour system, had been working in a factory in a town captured by the Red Army, and was held as a prisoner in a Russian camp. Her father, a conscript soldier, had been taken prisoner on the Eastern Front and was in a P.O.W. Camp.

The mother was released in 1951. Through the persistent efforts of the pastor and his congregation, she was traced and reunited with the daughter she had given up as lost. The Red Cross established contact with the father, so that when eventually he was freed in 1954 he knew where to go to find his family. But there was no easy happy ending to the sad story. Determined to make a home for his wife and daughter, he started work too soon after his privations and collapsed. Devoted nursing, his own passionate will to live, and the assurance that relief agencies would look after them all until he was well again, combined to pull him through, though it was touch and go for nearly a year.

Now he has a home, a job, a family and a church. If you did not know their story you would never guess how painfully they had climbed to life again from the blackest depths of despair. They look so normal. They look, in fact, just like ordinary human beings—and that, of course, is precisely what they are.

As awakened concern and sympathetic interest spotlight 'the refugee problem', we tend to picture the refugee as a peculiar individual, set apart from the rest of mankind by some distinguishing mark. Or perhaps, as we try to grapple with the concept of millions of them, we see a faceless mob of the depersonalized victims of tragedy. The first, and most

important, thing to remember is that they are people. The refugee is a man like other men, but one caught up in the storms of tyranny of war. The millions are made up of ones.

As such they are a representative cross-section of humanity at large. Like any other large group of our fellow humans they have their black sheep—the unscrupulous, the cadging and the vociferously ungrateful. If parcels come frequently in a camp for one family, other families are jealous and mutter darkly about official favouritism. The task of the United Nations and voluntary agencies would undoubtedly be much simpler, and there would be less need for the sometimes exasperating cross-checking and regulation, if they were all perfect; but then a great deal of life everywhere would be much simpler if we, too, were all perfect.

But in general, and like us, what most of them want is a home of their own and a job by which they can support themselves. If it was possible they would go to the place they still call home. I remember an engineer near Lake Constance who talked with tears in his eyes of his farm in Silesia, and an Arab in the vast camp near Jericho who longed to see his village in the land now called Israel. But as things now are, they cannot go back. They are strangers in strange lands. wanting homes and work. They are victims of conflicting ideologies or of the fury of war. But above all they are people, our brothers and sisters.

TWO

HOW MANY, WHERE AND WHY?

THESE ARE the plain, obvious questions. Unfortunately, no equally plain answers can be given. In the first place, so much depends on how one defines a refugee. Is everyone who has fled from or been driven from his native land a refugee? Or is only the unfortunate who is still dependent on the generosity of a governmental or voluntary agency so to be classified? For example, the little family to which I introduced you is established and self-supporting. In 1954 they

were undoubtedly refugees. Are they now? Is the Palestinian Arab with a job in Beirut or the Pole with a job in Bradford a refugee? If we say that they are, then there are about 40 million of them. If we define more rigorously, the total is nearer 15 million—which is still a lot of people.

In the second place, the total changes every day. People die in the camps and children are born. One family is enabled to emigrate to Canada, another to Brazil, and a group of ex-T.B. cases find comfort at last in a sanatorium in Scotland. But a group slips into India from Tibet, and another from Eastern Germany crosses to the West by way of Berlin.

The better way to answer our questions is to consider briefly the recent history of the refugee. First of all, and in many ways the saddest of all, come those whom we call the Displaced Persons. These, like the organist's mother, were the slave labourers of the Nazi war machine—more than six million from the states over-run by the German armies. Many went home or were settled in Germany at the end of the war. No fewer than two million emigrated overseas—and the vast majority of these were looked after by Christian denominations. Incidentally, as Janet Lacey tells in her admirable booklet *Refugees,* a quarter of a million came to the United Kingdom. At the end of 1959 100,000 still remain, waiting with an indifference that has long passed beyond despair; their plight is a reproach to our humanity.

By Article XII of the Potsdam Agreement 18 million Germans were expelled from their homes at the end of the second World War. Packed like cattle into goods trains, they were thrust out of the occupied Eastern territories in bitter winter weather. Millions died or disappeared in what has truly been described as a massive crime against mankind. Four million were settled in Eastern Germany, nine million in the Federal Republic of Germany. As we are thinking of these mass expulsions and expropriations, each involving not statistics but people, we may remember too that 600,000 people of German origin were dumped in Austria, 350,000 Bulgarians of Turkish descent in Turkey, and 400,000 Karelians in Finland. The flow into the Federal Republic of Germany is continuing. Not driven now, but escaping, nearly three million have fled from Eastern Germany.

The other major group of refugees, and the best known—

for their story was not submerged in the confusion of the months following the end of the second World War—are the Hungarians; 200,000 fled after the dramatic revolt in October 1956.

We move eastwards and come to Palestine, to a situation the more agonizing because it is not the consequence of a 'massive crime' but has all the elements of a classic tragedy. Irreconcilable rights and justifiable aspirations conflict. The creation of the State of Israel led to immediate war with the Arab States. The new State survived; but close on a million Arab refugees now dwell in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Nor is this all; 400,000 Jewish refugees from the Arab lands of Iraq, Yemen and North Africa have been found homes in Israel.

The sub-continent of India is not usually regarded as a refugee area, yet the truth is that the creation of the independent status of India and Pakistan in 1947 led directly to colossal mass migrations. Some 8,500,000 Hindus and Sikhs poured from Pakistan into India and 6,500,000 Muslims from India into Pakistan. The news at the time was full of the brave speeches of independence, and those who moved were granted full rights of citizenship by the countries to which they came, so the magnitude of the problem is still unrecognized in the West. It is an odd commentary on our 'news values' that we know more about the 15,000 refugees from Tibet than about the five million who still remain homeless and landless after this earlier great migration. In Ceylon, too, there are uprooted people. News is hard to come by, because of a rigid censorship, but it has been cautiously estimated that, following communal riots, 20,000 Tamils have fled from the north of the island to the south.

Still moving eastwards, we come next to Viet-nam, Hong Kong and Korea. South Korea and South Viet-nam are the halves of countries split in two to end warfare and to preserve the appearance of co-existence with Communism. No fewer than 900,000 refugees, mostly Roman Catholics, fled into South Viet-nam. At the end of hostilities there were nine million homeless people in South Korea, many of them wartime displaced persons from the south but many also who had fled from above the 38th Parallel. Hong Kong has two refugee groups; 700,000 are refugees from the Chinese mainland, and 10,000 are Europeans, mostly

refugees from the Russian Revolution of 1917 or their children, with the addition of others who escaped from Nazi persecution.

The sorry list is not yet complete, for in recent years the refugee has appeared in Africa. Some 160,000 Algerians have sought refuge in Tunisia and Morocco. Following the 'anti-foreign riots' in the French Ivory Coast, close on 10,000 have fled to Ghana, to Dahomey and to Togoland.

Here then, all too briefly and dispassionately, is the roll call of the refugee, the answer to the questions How many? and Where? As the story unfolded we glimpsed also the answer to the question Why? Many are, in the words, ironically enough, of Lenin in exile, 'men who have voted with their feet', preferring the hope of freedom in the unknown to the rigid totalitarianism into which Communism has grown. Many more are the unwilling and unconsulted victims of political bargains. They deserve and demand our compassion and our aid. What has the sympathy of man done to heal the wounds inflicted by man's inhumanity?

THREE

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE?

THE IMMEDIATE need of the refugee, as of the victim of a natural disaster, is relief. He must be found a temporary home and kept alive. But the solution to his problem is to enable him to become independent and self-supporting. This can be done in one of three ways. He may go home again. He may re-settle near the place to which he first came. He may emigrate, and start life anew in a distant land.

Reception camps, for example, were rapidly improvised in Austria and Yugoslavia to cope with the flood of Hungarians in 1956. The prominence given to their plight by its dramatic origin, and the rapid and generous response, meant that within six months 174,000 had been enabled to emigrate to thirty-five countries; 11,000 went back to Hungary; 550 settled permanently in Yugoslavia. But nearly 15,000 are left in Austria, no longer remembered by the world at large.

their numbers reduced with painful slowness as governmental and voluntary agencies find here a home for one and there a home for another.

It is a fact of experience that repatriation can be ruled out as a large-scale solution. The refugee in Hamburg has no desire to return to the Eastern Zone. The solution must therefore come from re-settlement. In the Near East, unfortunately, that has so far proved to be impossible. Plans have been prepared and many possibilities explored, but the tension between the Arab States and Israel frustrates every endeavour. The Arab governments assert that repatriation is the only answer, that the refugee must not surrender his claim to the land that is justly his. It is difficult to resist the impression that the unfortunate refugee is being used as a pawn in an intricate game of power politics. For years, for instance, the Arab authorities resisted the erection of huts in place of inadequate tents, on the ground that this would be conceding that the refugee would not return. There has of late been some slight weakening of this obdurate resistance. Huts are being built, schools opened, and one or two small-scale projects of rehabilitation permitted. But there are today more refugees in the Holy Land than there were in 1948, and next to nothing is done for them by the governments of the lands where they now live. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency and various voluntary agencies, almost all of them Christian, keep them alive. UNRWA, which has hovered continually on the brink of insolvency, has about £10 million to spend per annum to maintain a family of a million, and the voluntary agencies raise just over £3 million. It is a good work, but it can do no more than maintain refugees in the slow soul-destruction of dependence on charity. And the hardest thing that the devoted UNRWA authorities have to bear in tactful silence is the knowledge that if human decency had been allowed to overcome political rigidity half of them now could be leading useful lives.

In the Federal Republic of Germany there is a very different story to tell. The Government has tackled a problem of appalling magnitude with bold resolution. Since 1949 over £3,000 million has been spent on programmes of integration. Half the refugees have been completely settled in the general community. Half the remainder have more or

less steady work and are well on the way to integration. This massive work of rehabilitation has been accomplished almost entirely without external assistance.

In South Viet-nam an imaginative scheme of village resettlement, aided by generous gifts from the USA ($50 million annually) and France ($8 million annually), has reduced the problem to manageable proportions. The authorities believe they have the end in sight.

In South Korea, devastated and ravaged by the ingenious devilries of modern war, UN instituted the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency in 1950. Thirty-six governments co-operated, though, as usual, it was the United States which carried the heavy end of the financial burden. It was not until the undeclared war ended in 1953 that UNKRA could really get to work. It was not specifically a refugee relief organization, having the even larger task of re-creating South Korea as a viable State, but its operation inevitably assisted the refugees. Their numbers are now officially reduced from nine to three million. Nevertheless, the fact must be faced that the whole nation is dependent on external aid and on a huge, subsidized Army. A tremendous programme of relief and rehabilitation projects is maintained by Korean Church World Service, assisted by the World Council of Churches' Division of Inter-Church Aid (which is supported by the Inter-Church Aid Department of the British Council of Churches), but mainly financed by American aid.

In Hong Kong a complication that occurs less noticeably in other areas is vividly obvious. The standard of living of the native poor is as low as that of the refugees. On practical grounds of equity and humanity the Government has therefore decided to treat them equally so far as housing and assistance are concerned. The decision is just and sensible. but it complicates enormously the problem of securing aid through UN agencies. The Hong Kong Government has been most generous. Voluntary agencies have laboured heroically. But a community with under three million inhabitants, of whom a third are refugees and another third desperately poor, cannot solve its problem unaided. Emigration is not a practicable proposition; repatriation is impossible; slowly, very slowly, 'flexible formulae' are being

devised in UN that may enable the needed external aid to come in.

As one looks back to the years immediately after the second World War, the situation today reveals what tremendous progress has been made. As one looks at the situation now, one is much more conscious of the formidable problems that remain.

FOUR

WHO HAS CARED?

THE GREATER part of the responsibility of caring for the refugees has been carried by governmental and United Nations agencies. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Inter-Governmental Committee for European Migration, the devoted officials of UNRWA and UNKRA have never had enough resources at their disposal. The representatives of many nations at UN are better at making sympathetic speeches than at paying contributions in hard cash. But the work has never come to a standstill. As one observer shrewdly puts it, crumbs have been picked up and industriously moulded into at least half a loaf.

Working with the agencies, prodding and shaming governments, have been the voluntary agencies. They raise about £70 million a year. There are thirty-five such organizations in the Standing Conference of Voluntary Agencies Working for Refugees, but it is no slight to the magnificent service rendered by the others to assert that the lead is taken by avowedly Christian bodies, such as the Roman Catholic Caritas or the Inter-Church Aid and Service to Refugees of the World Council of Churches.

They both assist and supplement the service of the political agencies. They have greater freedom of action, so that on occasion they can give needed immediate help while the more ponderous UN machinery is set in motion, and, on occasion, can give help where the need cannot easily be fitted into the 'official categories'. They are less impersonal,

and bring to a bewildered refugee the invaluable sense of caring. Governments can find a place for the skilled and the young and the strong. The voluntary agencies look after the elderly and infirm. The world-wide yet personal contacts of the Churches fit them particularly for assisting some inter-governmental agencies. The World Council of Churches, for example, has rekindled hope for hundreds of thousands by undertaking the drudgery of personal counselling, finding sponsors, and securing visas for would-be emigrants—a service that can be appreciated fully only by those who have seen the bulky dossier for a single case.

What all this has meant can best be expressed in a few sentences taken from *We Strangers and Afraid* by Elfan Rees. 'The one constant factor in service to refugees in post-war years has been the work of the voluntary agencies. Governmental concern waxes and wanes, inter-governmental agencies have come and gone, but the voluntary agencies, when they put their hand to this plow, cannot and will not give up.... The bulk of their resources derive from their own constituencies and represent the enlightened conscience and sacrificial giving of the comparatively few who remember.... Perhaps in the end the greatest service of the agencies lies in their constancy. They have never eased up nor shared the optimism of governments as to early and total solutions. With realistic pessimism they have prepared themselves for the long haul and dedicated themselves to it. The information they disseminate and the appeals they make to their own people have ensured that, however forgetful the world in general, there are always some who remember the refugees. The agencies are in truth the conscience of the people and the keepers of that conscience.'

POSTSCRIPT

THIS HAS BEEN of set intention a factual survey, an endeavour to give within the compass of a few pages information about a great contemporary problem. We have raced over continents and talked in terms of millions. But all the time we have been thinking about people, about men

and women who can live again if they are remembered and cared for and helped.

We can help. We are all citizens, and can take the opportunity to assure the politicians that we shall not begrudge generosity to our brethren in distress. Methodists can share in the family service of the Methodist Relief Fund, reaching young Hungarians in Austria, building village settlements in Hong Kong, supporting pilot projects in Dahomey-Togo. We can assist the wide-ranging activity of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief or the concentrated and very practical compassion of the Ockenden Venture. But above all, we can give to the Inter-Church Aid Department of the British Council of Churches, the agency of the churches working together.

I treasure still a letter I received in 1956. It said, very simply: 'Your gift enabled me to start again. The love behind the gift gave me courage to start again.'

Who cares for the refugee?

BECKLY PAMPHLETS

Edited by Maldwyn Edwards, M.A., Ph.D., D.D.

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